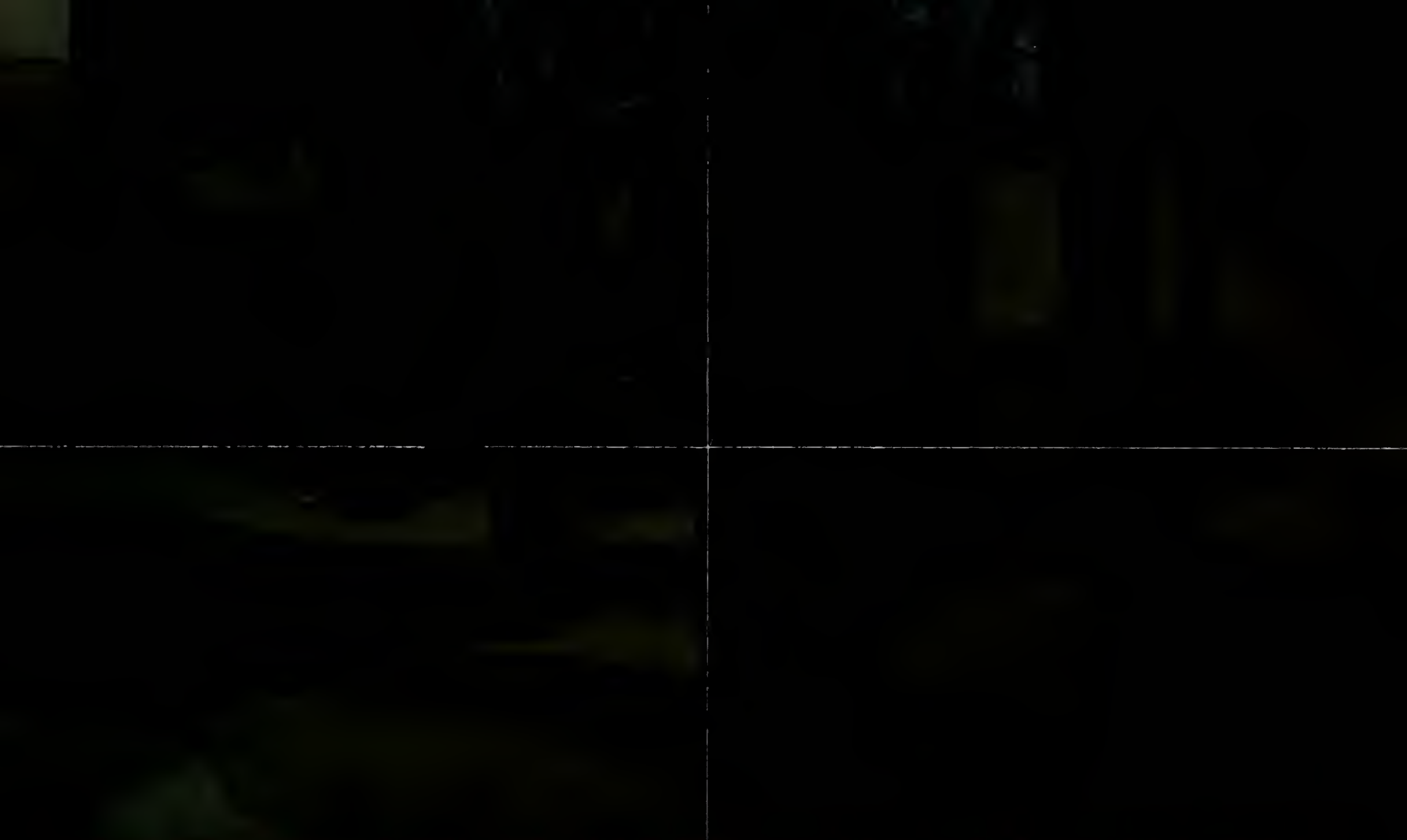
URBAN FIGURES



WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART AT PHILIP MORRIS

NOVEMBER 1988 – NOVEMBER 1989

Marisol, *Women and Dog*, 1964

Marisol

Marisol was trained as a painter. She switched to sculpture in the mid-fifties to free herself from what she perceived as the tyranny of seriousness that controlled Abstract Expressionist painting, the dominant movement of the early fifties. Marisol wanted to bring humor and a sense of fun to her work, something she felt no license to do if she remained a painter. In her words,

> Everything was serious. I was very sad myself and the people I met were so depressing. I started doing something funny so that I would become happier—and it worked.

Besides a sense of fun, Marisol brings to her sculpture elements of the absurd and ridiculous. There is something Beckett-like about her petrified heads and incarcerated bodies. (Beckett put his characters on the stage in sacks or trash cans up to their necks.) Stylistically, Marisol's works appear to be modernized versions of the monumentalized frontal figures of ancient Egyptian royalty, carved out of blocks of stone. Like the Egyptian sculptures, Marisol's figures too carry symbolic attributes. In *Women and Dog* (1964), the group of three women and a child, all in designer clothes, look as if they are on a shopping expedition on Madison Avenue. The well-behaved and neat little child is a symbol of motherhood for the woman next to her, while the animal-skin purse and pert pet dog are witty attributes of the mother's wealthy shopping companions. Marisol is also well known for her wittily rendered family groups. The happy mother and grimacing child of the autobiographical *Mi Mamá y Yo* (*My Mother and I*) (1968) is Marisol's humorous view of a relationship that is usually sentimentalized.

Marisol works directly on all stages of construction of her wood pieces, using mallet, chisel, power saws, drills, and sanders. When necessary, she makes casts of her own body for assembling with her sculpture. She then draws and paints directly onto the primed surfaces of the wood pieces.

Marisol studied at the Jepson School in Los Angeles, the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris in 1949, and with Hans Hofmann at the New School in New York (1951–54). She lives and works in New York.

Deborah Masters, *Circle* (detail), 1988

Deborah Masters

A tragic event inspired Deborah Masters' *Circle* (1988), a group of seven broad and strong-backed female figures. A child in the Brooklyn neighborhood where Masters lives fell from a roof and died. Women from the community gathered to hear the story and to grieve with the mother. After five days new feelings of strength and solidarity among the women tempered their grief. Moved by the experience, Masters resolved to begin *Circle*. Her main purpose was to create forms that would express the incredible spirit that survives devastating loss. For this, she looked back to an experience she had had in Italy. While in Padua, she had studied Giotto's fresco of *The Deposition of Christ* (c. 1305), in the Arena Chapel. She had been struck by the strong forms of the mourning women, which to her also expressed the will to live on. As Masters worked on the individual figures of *Circle*, she realized that the images of neighborhood women who came to comfort the bereaved mother were fusing with her memories of Giotto's awesome figures.

Circle is Masters' largest free-standing sculpture group to date. The figures were modeled and carved in clay and cast in hydrocal, a contemporary building material.

Masters studied at Moore College of Art, Philadelphia, and later obtained her B.A. from Bryn Mawr (1974). After graduating, she spent two years studying and working on her sculpture in Rome.

Alison Saar, *Tata en Tando y Sata*, 1985

Alison Saar

Three factors help explain the spirited nature of Alison Saar's work. As a child growing up in Los Angeles, she saw Simon Rodia's *The Watts Tower* (1921–54) and Grandma Prisbey's *Bottle Village* (1955–59), both Assemblage pieces, and she was mesmerized by their transformations of discarded household junk into magical and dazzling art environments. Saar's mother, Assemblage artist Betye Saar, reinforced her daughter's interest in using junk materials. Take a second look at *Tata en Tando y Sata* (*Tata in Hat and Suit*) (1985) and *Sweet Young Thing* (1987): both are made of tin ceiling material.

Saar's own life as a young black woman of light skin color brought her into contact with the cultures of other nations and ethnic groups. *Tata en Tando y Sata* is a wittily rendered zoot-suited Chicano figure. Drawing on African culture, Saar believes in the existence of spirituality in objects. And, like many young black artists, she intends her works to give off a certain subliminal energy derived from their materials and colors. Of the two works shown here, an electric spirituality sparks out of *Sweet Young Thing*. The red borders of the dress form a cross, which, together with the crimson spots on the figure's feet, give *Sweet Young Thing* a crucified air. The figure possesses glitteringly fierce eyes and a faintly angry head. Surely the title, *Sweet Young Thing*, is intended ironically.

Saar, who received her M.F.A. at the Otis Art Institute, Los Angeles (1981), moved to New York in 1983.

George Segal, *Couple on Two Benches*, 1985

George Segal

For three decades, George Segal has been producing figural groups which are commentaries on modern, urban-suburban society. But he establishes a useful Brechtian emotional distance between his works and the public. Unlike Duane Hanson's figures, Segal's do not confound us. Their expressionist plaster surfaces with patinas of blue-black or white announce from afar that they are art and not life. This distance gives us room to reflect, to make connections between his figures and ourselves. Whoever has worked on a nine-to-five schedule cannot fail to be affected by Segal's *Rush Hour* (1983), with its phalanx of six raincoated commuters, hell-bent for office or home. Is work such drudgery, such debilitation that we look like this? Evidently Segal, although deeply sympathetic to his subject, would have us think so.

The composition of *Couple on Two Benches* (1985) emphasizes the separateness and, at the same time, the bonding and sympathy between the male and female figures. It is a lucid and lyrical example of how Segal uses structure to convey a complex emotional state. The figures face in opposite directions, but are sympathetically linked to each other through the angle of their bodies, the position of their arms, and the gaze of the male figure toward the woman.

Segal, trained as a painter in the late forties and fifties, turned to sculpture as a way out of Abstract Expressionism, producing his first life cast in 1961. Originally, he soaked bandages in plaster and wrapped them around a subject. In the early seventies, he began making life molds in plaster sections and casting these in hydrostone, a durable industrial plaster. He started to work with bronze in 1976.

Segal attended the Cooper Union School of Art, Rutgers University, Pratt Institute, New York University (B.S., 1949), where he studied with the sculptor Tony Smith, and Rutgers University (M.F.A., 1963). He lives and works in New Brunswick, New Jersey.

Works in the Exhibition

The works in this exhibition were selected by Josephine Gear, Branch Director, and may change from time to time, due to loan commitments.

Dimensions are in inches, height precedes width precedes depth.

JOHN AHEARN (b. 1951) with
RIGOBERTO TORRES (b. 1960)
Kevin in Thought, 1986
Oil on reinforced fiberglass, 12 × 25½ × 13
Brooke Alexander, New York

JONATHAN BOROFSKY (b. 1942)
Man with Briefcase at 2,783,421, 1980–82
Aluminum cutout, 89½ × 35½ × ½
Paula Cooper Gallery, New York

Flying Man with Briefcase at 2,816,949, 1983
Painted gatorboard, 94½ × 24½ × 1
Paula Cooper Gallery, New York

VIOLA FREY (b. 1933)
Little Big Man, 1987
Glazed ceramic, 106½ × 52 × 23
Rena Bransten Gallery, San Francisco

Woman in Suit, 1987
Glazed ceramic, 121 × 33 × 24
Rena Bransten Gallery, San Francisco

Questioning Woman, 1988
Glazed ceramic, 108 × 33 × 28
Nancy Hoffman Gallery, New York

DUANE HANSON (b. 1925)
Reading Man, 1972
Polyester and fiberglass, polychromed in oil, with accessories, life-size
Private collection

Woman Reading a Paperback, 1978
Polyvinyl, polychromed in oil, with accessories, life-size
Collection of Joyce Bogart Trabulus

ALEX KATZ (b. 1927)
Ada, 1988
Five cutouts from an edition of seventy-five, silkscreen on aluminum, 65 × 10⅛ × 5 each
Styria Studio, Inc., New York

MARISOL (b. 1930)
Women and Dog, 1964
Wood, plaster, synthetic polymer, and miscellaneous items, 72 × 82 × 16
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, Purchase, with funds from the Friends of the Whitney Museum of American Art 64.17

Mi Mamá y Yo, 1968
Painted steel and bronze, 73 × 56 × 24
Sidney Janis Gallery, New York

DEBORAH MASTERS (b. 1951)
Circle, 1988
Cast hydrocal, 84 × 192 × 96
Ledis Flam Gallery, Brooklyn, New York

ALISON SAAR (b. 1956)
Tata en Tando y Sata, 1985
Painted tin, 76 × 21½ × 8
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Purchase, Clarence Y. Palitz, Jr., Gift, 1986

Sweet Young Thing, 1987
Painted tin, 73 × 12 × 5
Collection of Robert MacLeod

GEORGE SEGAL (b. 1924)
Rush Hour, 1983
Painted plaster, life-size
Sidney Janis Gallery, New York
(illustrated on front)

Couple on Two Benches, 1985
Painted plaster, wood, and metal, life-size
Sidney Janis Gallery, New York

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URBAN FIGURES

Plato had little time for representations of the material world. He believed that such illusions beguiled people into mistaking the everyday world for the only truth or reality. And representational art, aided by its seductive illusionistic powers, may even prevent the quest for truth which, for Plato and his followers, lies in the metaphysical realm. Platonic thought, revived in later centuries as Neoplatonism, has a long and intertwined history with art. Its most recent and notable revival occurred with four vanguard movements in American painting: Abstract Expressionism, Color Field and Hard Edge painting, Minimalism, and Conceptualism. Although visually distinct from one another, all four movements placed emphasis on the spiritual and the non-corporeal, eschewing the representation of the human figure which, it was felt, necessarily excluded the world of the spirit and of ideas.

"Urban Figures" includes the work of two generations of artists who took issue with this creed. In the older generation, George Segal was impatient with the Abstract Expressionists, while in the next, Jonathan Borofsky reacted with equal force against the Minimalists and Conceptualists. Many of the artists in this exhibition began their careers as abstract painters, but eventually turned from painting to figurative sculpture out of a desire to make art, ideas, and the representation of the human condition accessible again to a larger audience. This exhibition honors their wishes by assembling figurative sculpture of urban types—types which thus offer some point of contact with the daily visitors to the Sculpture Court and gallery. Together the works present a variety of artists' visions—thoughtful, sobering, and humorous—of modern man and woman.

John Ahearn, *Kevin in Thought*, 1986

John Ahearn

In 1970 John Ahearn, rejecting the elitist limits of mainstream art, moved to the South Bronx. Although his move was physically extreme, in an ideological context it was not an isolated event. Ahearn was part of the political art movement of the seventies, which rejected the mores of the New York art world and sought to reach broader audiences. In the South Bronx, Ahearn searched for an art form that could be produced in the community and elicit the collaboration and interest of the neighborhood. He hit upon the idea of making sculptures based on life casts taken of his neighbors. In 1979, working with Rigoberto Torres, he began casting portraits in fiberglass. In two or three years they had produced hundreds of portraits, which they exhibited in galleries or on the neighborhood block. The portraits were hung on walls, neighbor by neighbor, following the order of real life street addresses. Ahearn determined that this arrangement would carry some sense of the community when the portraits were exhibited outside of the South Bronx. The artist is never happy when the portraits are separated, as here, from the larger group.

Around 1985, Ahearn also began producing freestanding life-cast sculptures, of which *Kevin in Thought* (1986) is one. Ahearn (and one imagines Kevin collaborated) carefully selected the seemingly natural pose of *Kevin*. The clean, lean sculptural form in fact brings to mind two of Rodin's sculptures, the walking posture of *St. John the Baptist* (1880) and, for the gesture of the hand to the chin, *The Thinker* (1888), but without the earlier figure's histrionics.

The life casts are made by smearing alginate, a substance used by dentists for tooth impressions, over the subjects, one area at a time. When the weather permits, this process takes place on the street. Molds are made, and from these, fiberglass casts are produced, assembled, and painted in oils. Ahearn and, sometimes, Torres paint the sculptures. In the beginning, the two artists made casts only of heads. Gaining assurance, they cast progressively larger areas of the human form.

Ahearn, a native of Binghamton, New York, obtained his B.F.A. from Cornell University (1973). Before making sculpture, he was a video and performance artist. He continues to live and work in the South Bronx.

Torres completed an apprenticeship as a sculptor for a commercial statuary firm, Fabrica del Carmen, before he apprenticed to John Ahearn. Torres lives and works in the South Bronx.

Jonathan Borofsky, *Man with Briefcase at 2,783,421*, 1980–82

Jonathan Borofsky

Jonathan Borofsky brings to his work a certain moral and political consciousness. Early in his career, in defiance of Minimalism and Conceptualism, the dominant art movements of the late sixties and early seventies, he returned to recognizable subject matter. But the meaning of any Borofsky piece is often slippery, as hard to get hold of as the meaning of anything in life. *Man with Briefcase at 2,783,421* (1980–82) and *Flying Man with Briefcase at 2,816,949* (1983) are cases in point. They are two archetypes in the artist's repertoire of images of modern man. Together with the Running Man, Hammering Man, and Chattering Man, they appear and reappear in Borofsky's installations, acquiring different contexts each time. The individual pieces themselves are open to different interpretations. *Man with Briefcase at 2,783,421* and *Flying Man with Briefcase at 2,816,949* have what might be described as a dialectical relationship, being positive and negative images of each other. Other contradictions abound. Flying usually symbolizes freedom or escape, but is the more appropriate association in this instance a weightlessness, a lack of substance? Certainly the companion piece, *Man with Briefcase*, literally has no substance.

The meanings of the numbers used on both works is ambivalent. In 1969, Borofsky began counting to infinity, for him a peaceful and meditative activity, which he continues intermittently to this day. The number on a work represents the point he had counted to when the work was conceived. But apart from this autobiographical context, numbers attached to human beings usually have sinister associations. Concentration camp victims were numbered, as are inmates in jails. This same loss of human identity is found in the Social Security numbers we get from the Federal government or the account numbers assigned by credit card companies. On the other hand, perhaps the point is not to make too much of the meanings of Borofsky's works. After all, there is something very funny about see-through men and flying figures.

Borofsky obtained his B.F.A. at Carnegie-Mellon University (1964) and his M.F.A. at the Yale School of Art and Architecture (1966). He lives and works in Venice, California.

ola Frey, *Little Big Man*, 1987

Viola Frey

Viola Frey's *Little Big Man* (1987) stands tall, with hands on hips, clothed in a bulky jacket suit painted in bold zones of color. *Little Big Man* has the attributes of power and the gesture of assertiveness. But look at his expression—owl-eyed and fish-lipped. Is he frightened? Unsure of himself? Or is he merely a foolish figure? *Woman in Suit* (1987) might also appear ridiculous at first if we focus on her dated attire and the little hat that caps her 10-foot tall figure. But her expression is unsettling. At what is she looking? What distracts her? And what does the *Questioning Woman* (1988) question?

Kitsch porcelain figures of the kind that serve as salt- and peppershakers or bric-a-brac shelf decorations are the source of the funky look of Frey's figures. To "dress" her figures, Frey roots around in flea markets for second-hand clothing of thirties and forties vintage. However, we should not be misled by fairground resemblances and flea-market apparel; these ceramic figures are sobering studies of unhappy, contemporary psychological states.

Frey creates each figure from the bottom up, making sections of clay forms. After an initial week-long firing, each piece is glazed and fired twice more. When finished, each part is assembled and bolted together.

Frey obtained a B.F.A. from the California College of Arts and Crafts, Oakland (1956), where she currently teaches, and an M.F.A. from Tulane University (1958). She lives and works in Oakland.

Duane Hanson, *Woman Reading a Paperback*, 1978

Duane Hanson

A Duane Hanson figure startles most people into taking a second, close-up look, trying to figure out how they came to be art and not flesh. Once reassured that they are art, who can resist the temptation to pore over a Hanson face and form—something we have no license to do with our fellow humans.

The success of Duane Hanson's simulacra of ordinary human figures has been a problem. Giving in to the impulse to stand and stare may be very gratifying, but generally this is where most responses to a Hanson work stop. Not many of us have gone on to more thoughtful reflections. As Kirk Varnedoe has pointed out, European audiences, aided partially by their distance from the American types represented, have more easily spotted the critical content of Hanson's work. Europeans see the American working people who comprise most of Hanson's subjects as commentaries on society, especially American society. Hanson's figures express an isolation and quiet despair. *Reading Man* (1972) and *Woman Reading a Paperback* (1978) are clearly waiting for something or someone. But they are not entirely at ease, they have about them an air of resignation, anger, or irritation.

Duane Hanson began producing his life-cast figures in the late sixties. He uses a fast-setting silicone rubber applied to one limb or area at a time. Then a mold of plaster of Paris is applied over the silicone mold. Polyvinyl, tinted with oil paints, is poured into the molds. When set and assembled, the sculpture is painted and dressed with carefully chosen clothing and accessories appropriate to the figure's type and class. In the late seventies Hanson, troubled by polyvinyl's lack of durability, began making his figures of bronze.

Hanson earned his M.F.A. from the Cranbrook Academy of Art in Michigan (1951), and lived in Germany from 1953 to 1960. He moved to Florida in 1965, where he continues to reside.

Alex Katz, *Ada*, 1988

Alex Katz

Alex Katz, well known for his paintings and prints, has been producing cutouts since 1959. A cutout is neither a painting nor a sculpture. Although freestanding and independent in space, it has no volume. The idea of a cutout occurred to Katz in 1959. Dissatisfied with the relationship between figures and their background in a painting, he cut out the figures. Later he mounted them on plywood and stood them on bases. The next step was to make figures of aluminum and to paint directly onto the metal or, as with the *Ada* figures exhibited here, to silkscreen images on aluminum.

Katz belongs to a generation that sought to reintroduce the figurative imagery abandoned during the 1950s by the Abstract Expressionists. His conduit to representation was mass culture; the scale of his figures, their simplified delineation, and broad, flat areas of color have their origins in the figures on billboards, while other techniques are borrowed from commercial art. Katz's images are freeze-framed and cropped (like his *Ada* cutout, along one edge), clarified, generalized, idealized, and enlarged. These cutouts, like the consumer culture items which inspired them, are produced in multiples. Although all are identical, each figure seems more effective as part of a crowd.

Katz's images are of a different order than their commercial counterparts. Although *Ada*, like a billboard figure, is a type—self-assured and emotionally detached—her ostensible composure is disrupted. The gesture of her right hand clasped to her chest signifies protectiveness and vulnerability; it is at odds with her cool-as-a-cucumber look. The individuality of the gesture may owe to Katz's close observations of his intimate circle; Ada is his wife, and he usually draws on family and friends as models.

Katz studied at the Cooper Union School of Art, New York, from 1945 to 1949, and at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, Maine, from 1949 to 1950. He lives and works in New York.